University of Alberta

A Survey of Teachers' Opinions About Elders' Involvement in Formative Teacher Evaluation

by

Timothy Gordon Margetts

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

in

First Nations Education

Department of Educational Policy Studies

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 2002

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Degree: Master of Education

Year this Degree Granted: 2002

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *A Survey of Teachers' Opinions About Elders' Involvement in Formative Teacher Evaluation* by Timothy Gordon Margetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in First Nations Education.

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Abstract

In Canadian First Nations education, one long-standing impediment to good communication between teachers and community members, including students, has been teachers' lack of knowledge of the community. In Samson Cree First Nation in Alberta the school administration suggested that community Elders might act as mentors to teachers through a formal process of formative teacher evaluation. This study explores the range of local teacher opinion about that proposal. There was a 67% response rate to a questionnaire that was sent to all of the system's teachers: a very high majority of teachers saw real merit in the proposal, though expressed concerns or cautions about the way such a program might be implemented. Interviews with two groups of teachers and with Elders explored those concerns.

Acknowledgedments

I am grateful to the people of Samson Cree First Nation.

Many people helped me. I will thank them in person.

Dedication

For Mom

Preface

The story I am about to give you is from my experience as a new teacher who was given the opportunity to teach on a reserve in Alberta in the early 1990s. My quest to complete this thesis and my first year of teaching paralleled the same theme: learning how to complete research and my quest to be a teacher are very similar.

During my first year as a teacher of vocational education and core subjects I was privileged to participate in a culture camp designed to teach students about their culture, with Elders and with various people from the reserve. As the camp was being set up I was instructed to help create a meat-drying rack. The hunters of the reserve had killed and dressed a moose for the two-day culture camp. The female students were given instructions about how to prepare the meat for drying, and as they were completing the dressing of the meat, the students in my construction class were given instructions by an Elder and his wife as to how to complete the drying rack. So with my youthful idealism and my university degree, my students and I went out to the bush and cut down the trees in a traditional way, following the correct protocol.

We worked for hours in the morning and finished in relatively good time. After lunch we stood back and were quite satisfied with the shape and design we had created. The Elder walked up to the rack and with a smile said that the rack looked really good, but he said he was curious as to why we had used green wood poles with the bark still on the logs. The Elder recommended we peel the bark off before assembly, and not after we had put all the poles together. He said that the green wood would transfer the taste of the bark into the meat, and he walked away with a big smile.

The students and I quickly disassembled the rack and proceeded into the bush to find dry wood poles to assemble the rack. By now the day was getting on in the afternoon, and we found ourselves before suppertime assembling the rack, trying to finish building so that the fire could be built before the sun went down. We diligently created a mammoth structure because we had seen the amount of meat being prepared. We lashed the poles together since nails would have affected the meat. As the Elder's wife came out of the teepee she smiled and walked around the structure and shook it a bit. She looked at our handiwork and told us that the wood was peeled right, and was dry, but she told us that we should have used willow, so the meat wouldn't absorb the taste of birch or pine. She said we had done a great job, and that the willow could be found about five miles away by a river. As my students and I ate the moose stew and bannock she had made for us, and watched the sunset, we decided to complete the project early the next morning, the first day of culture camp.

The next morning, after borrowing a pickup truck from my father, and with another teacher driving the van, we departed from the school for the camp in the bush. We took a look at yesterday's work—piles of poles of green wood on the ground and a huge rack in the corner of the camp. We disassembled our rack and continued our journey, looking for dry willow. We made sure to peel the bark off prior to assembly. We were gone until the late morning when we returned with our prize in the back of the truck. Other students were cutting strips of hide to lash the poles together, rather than use the expensive nylon rope I had purchased for my structure. The Elder's son had been working on the site prior to our arrival and was digging the fire pit next to the firewood—and he said that the firewood was perfect—and said it was a good thing we hadn't tried

to use *that* wood for the rack. We just smiled and agreed with him and started building the structure. By mid-afternoon we had completed it and were ready for inspection. As the Elder and his wife looked over the structure they started laughing at how fast we had built this rack compared to the first two. They walked away saying nothing and we waited for them to come back. And they did, with all the meat they had prepared that morning and the day before. As we assisted them building the fire with the ex-poles, now firewood, they showed us how to take care of the meat, now that we had a rack. Trying not to be analytical I stood back and asked them "Why didn't you tell me how to build the rack with the right wood.?"

The Elder smiled and said "You didn't ask".

As a teacher fresh from university and having all the latest theories of learning in my repertoire I discovered that all one has to do is ask—a basic point I remember even years later. Writing this thesis I discovered again that one must listen and ask prior to attempting a version of a drying rack or a version of social research. I have completed other versions of this thesis. This time I asked the questions. The answers I try to provide in this work will be in the pursuit of truth. I look into the sunset and pray the answers will be there, and that I can express the answers in a way that others can see them.

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CHAPTER 1. THE SETTING

Introduction

The evolution of teacher evaluation in Alberta has not taken into account the perspectives of the First Nations. Provincial practices and standards in teacher evaluation reflect policies that do not take cultural differences or community differences into account. That approach does not fit with another perspective in contemporary education in which educators recognize that there are differences amongst people in learning styles, and that the local area has a large impact on the learning styles of children. That is especially so for First Nation's students and even more so for First Nations students living in reserve communities.

I base this work on the premise that educators must find ways of providing feedback to the learners in their care. A teacher has to communicate with the learner in terms the learner can relate to. The substance of that communication should not be just curriculum content. The teacher's role is also to give the student an indication of how the student is doing. In other words, teachers do not just dispense information, they have to be engaged in interaction at many levels. The program of studies must fit the community and be understandable in the community, and if that community is a reserve it will be different in many ways from other rural and urban communities. In my experience, that means that the reserve teacher must find ways of including information and perspective originating in the oral tradition, and adapt it to a program which is designed to transmit information and grade its mastery based almost exclusively on the written text.

The Elders hold the oral tradition and information of the past for the future. They have the training to give that information to the youth or to community members who are willing to listen. Many Elders I have spoken to believe that when a person is ready, that person will seek the appropriate information. The information will be in various modes or forms. It may be spiritual, social, psychological, or physical, but the Elder knows what sources are most appropriate for each individual, and at which stage. I began this research project by seeking for a way to bring those Elders who have a commitment to improving education together with reserve teachers who want to improve their teaching practice.

When I became a teacher I started on a quest. I wanted to find or develop programs that were based on a strong focus on the development of the student. I found that the best programs have the best teachers. I learned that it does not make sense, if we want to create places for teacher development or improvement, to focus separately on teachers or students. The success of developing better skills and competencies for teachers can only be observed in the quality of the interactions they have with their students, and then in student outcomes. To improve a learning environment for students, we have to empower teachers with knowledge and skills that are appropriate to the community in which they teach. I think that the best schools seem to have programs that are based on developing the teacher prior to the teachers even working with the students.

The school board I worked with when I began this research emphasized the need for more community development in the school system. As a First Nations community, it has a markedly different educational history than the surrounding non-native

communities, and many community members have expectations of the school that differ quite dramatically from the expectations of people in the surrounding non-native communities. Teachers from outside the community may never know the extent of miscommunication or misunderstanding that exists between school staff and parents. A crucial part of teacher development for teaching in a reserve school should be focused on ways for teachers to learn about the community, its life, and what it is like to live there. In light of that, I have been curious and even perplexed to see that although many teachers who work in reserve schools may have very high qualifications, *most* seemed reluctant to deal with, encounter, or understand the traditional Native learning system. The "community" is a cliché for most of them, a kind of abstraction, like "culture," that does not have any real application beyond talk.

This thesis is contextualized in my effort, over two and a half years, to develop and implement educational policy in that specific reserve community, policy that recognizes the value of the traditional indigenous learning methodology. One idea I had with respect to adopting an administrative model based on traditional learning methodology was a proposal for the creation of a self-evaluation instrument for use by teachers, to develop their practice as professionals in a way that was consistent with the traditions of the community. An initial step was to review the academic and scholarly literature, both in research and theory, about teacher evaluation in indigenous communities. The only information I could find focused on summative evaluation and was not specific to indigenous communities. It is difficult to account for the relative lack of research literature on formative evaluation of teachers in reserve settings.

My focus was on formative, not summative, evaluation. Summative teacher evaluation is for contract renewal and teacher placement for the next contract year. The evaluative criteria used in summative evaluation, and the processes used for it, differ in fundamental nature from the processes and objectives of formative evaluation, which focuses upon the professional development of the teachers. It seems reasonable that formative evaluation in a reserve community would involve a measure of how well a teacher understands the community in which they teach. I would have to say that many teachers with whom I have worked have had to rely on information about the community that is filtered through a bias. They may get the information in a haphazard way from the students, parents and other staff they work with; but it comes in the form of situational encounters without much in the way of a context for understanding. That kind of information, especially when the information source is other teachers, can unfortunately lead to a kind of stereotyping based on a misunderstanding of culture. In my experience that can lead to the teachers' fundamental misunderstanding of the community. The misunderstandings can be perpetuated, in both directions.

The Elders, the keepers of local knowledge, have the resources to assist the teachers in their development but seldom have a comfortable forum anywhere connected to the school to help or direct teachers learning about the community. It seemed to me that the best thing the community could do for the teachers to whom it entrusts its children and grandchildren would be to provide for a process whereby the community's acknowledged experts—the Elders—could interact with the teachers and give them knowledge and guidance about how to communicate with the children.

In summary, I developed this project while working as a senior administrator for the Nipisihkopahk Education Authority (NEA) with the Samson Cree First Nation in

central Alberta between 1997 and 2000. I saw a need for the teachers in the four schools operated by NEA to have a clearer understanding of the community. I had observed a kind of systematic misunderstanding between teachers and reserve community members in the two other reserves in which I had taught, so I knew that the barriers to understanding I observed were not unique. In fact, it was a common pattern. It seemed only reasonable that the best way to break down those barriers and give the teachers access to the best source of knowledge about the community would be to create some place for them to interact with the keepers of the true knowledge of the community, the Elders. I knew that there were Elders in the community who were more than willing to do this for the teachers, for the benefit of all, but especially for the children and grandchildren of the community. The big question of course is how to create that place for interaction, given that teachers already are under too much pressure. The creative idea here was to identify formative evaluation as a process in which Elders could meet and communicate with teachers. In the next chapter I go into more detail about that proposal but first it is important to introduce the community in which the idea came into being.

Samson Cree First Nation

The reserve on which I completed the study is the home of Samson Cree First Nation. In both population and geography, Samson is the largest of the four Cree nations whose adjacent reserves are located around a central town site, Hobbema, Alberta. The other First Nations are Ermineskin, Louis Bull, and Montana. The reserves are located between the Counties of Ponoka and Wetaskiwin, which have combined rural populations of around 17,000, and between two urban municipalities: Ponoka (population 5861), within 5 kms of Montana reserve, and Wetaskiwin (10771 population), 8 kms north of Samson reserve. Two major highway systems pass through or near the reserves and there are major urban centres that allow for daily commutes to and from the reserves. The economy of the reserves is based primarily on petroleum development, agriculture, and service, though there is a traditional economy as well. The language is Plains Cree, Y-dialect, which is spoken as a first language by most people over 50, but not by a majority of younger people. There is an active Cree language program in the schools.

All four First Nations are original signatories to Treaty 6, having signed Treaty in 1876. In1877, one large reserve, the Maskwachees Reserve, was established and the four nations occupied it together until 1899, when Samson, Ermineskin, and Louis Bull First Nations each took their own reserve. The Montana reserve was established ten years later. Another reserve, set aside for all four bands as a fishing base, is situated at Pigeon Lake, Alberta, about 40 km west of the main reserves.

Canadian education for the Samson nation has been a microcosm of the larger Canadian picture. A residential school on Ermineskin Reserve was set up by the Roman Catholic church very early in the reserve era. The church provided a kind of education for some of the reserve population and when the Federal government began operating the school the church still provided most staff and operated the residence. Until the early 1970s, when most of the residential schools were closed, many Samson members attended Ermineskin School. Many others were sent to other residential schools in Alberta as well. There is no way that educational standards were anything like those in

non-native schools and until the 1960s most of the students could not even go on to high school. There was also a protestant day school on Samson reserve for many years, though a small minority of Samson children attended there.

Beginning with secondary students in the early 1960s, a few reserve students went to schools in surrounding Alberta jurisdictions under provisions of tuition agreements negotiated by the federal government. An education committee of the four Maskwachees First Nations assumed some measure of control of Ermineskin schools in the early 1970s, but the trend to off-reserve schooling grew. For several years between the 1970s and 1990s a majority of reserve children attended school in Wetaskiwin or Ponoka. In the mid-1970s, the University of Calgary, along with the Four Band Education Committee, operated a teacher-education program to provide the first two years of a Bachelor of Education program on the reserve. In the mid-1980s, the four First Nations each assumed individual control of their schools.

Until the 1980s, Alberta had had the worst record of any region of Canada in First Nations access to post-secondary education and in the early 1970s there were fewer than five First Nations certified teachers in the province. Aboriginal people in Alberta faced immense barriers to post secondary education. But in that climate of the 1970s there were some courageous trailblazers from Samson Cree First Nations who got teaching certificates and university degrees in education—Grace Buffalo, Jerry Saddleback, and Walter Lightning. From other Maskwachees First Nations there were Sylvia Oldpan, the late Sister Nancy LeClaire, and Josephine Rain Thompson. By the mid 1980s several others had followed them.

Now there is better access to post-secondary education off reserve. At Hobbema, the four First Nations collaborate in operating a post-secondary institution, Maskwachees Cultural College, where university-level courses are offered.

Indian and North Affairs Canada documents the current population of Samson Cree Nation as 5804, of whom 82% (4758) reside on the reserves. Its relative size can be compared to Ermineskin [3025 population, with 2190 living on the reserve], Louis Bull [1491 population, with 1111 living on the reserve], and Montana [758 population, with 510 living on the reserve]).

At the time this study was undertaken, Samson First Nation had established the Nipisihkopahk Education Authority, which operated four schools, including one at Pigeon Lake, and employed over 120 teachers, both native and non-native. At the time this research was completed, between 5 and 10 certified teachers in the schools were members of Samson First Nation, and approximately 35 other certified teachers were members of other First Nations or Metis communities. At the time I began this research, I was working for Nipisihkopahk Education Authority as a senior administrator for all Samson First Nations schools.

The Research Project

I developed this research project as part of a larger general plan. As an administrator I saw a problem in the way teachers in the reserve schools in which I worked seemed isolated from the community. I developed the idea that formative teacher evaluation by Elders would be one way to give teachers the knowledge and tools they needed to become better teachers in that context.

If that kind of thing is to work, teachers and Elders will need to work together in a context of respect. I had previously spoken with Elders, both at Samson Cree First Nation and elsewhere about this plan, so I had a good idea of the range of opinion they might offer me or other members of the administration about the plan. I wanted to assess general patterns of response to the suggestion amongst the teachers. This project was developed to assess how the teachers in general would react to the suggestion that they be evaluated by Elders.

Premises About Evaluation by Elders

The development of the idea of asking Elders and teachers to work together in formative evaluation is based on this set of premises.

Teachers need to know about the community in order to be effective teachers. In my experience in schools on reserves, many of the teachers, even teachers with long experience in the school, do not know much about the community.

Quite a bit of what teachers think they know about the community is wrong.

The Elders have the knowledge to help them know about the community, and how to use that knowledge of the community to become better teachers.

There is a lot of variability amongst the teachers in terms of skills, knowledge, and experience.

The best teachers understand these premises. Yet amongst the best teachers are many who have misinformation about the community.

Teacher evaluation, as we do it nowadays, is a problem area and needs improvement:

The objective of summative evaluation is to get a measure of teacher performance. The objective of formative evaluation, on the other hand, is to use evaluative statements and observations in order to provide a way for teachers to improve.

Formal summative evaluation is typically a way of judging teacher performance against some standard and then reporting it; it is almost always completed because of a policy or legal requirement. Tenure and promotion may depend on summative teacher evaluation.

Formative teacher evaluation is an area where Elders could work with teachers to become better teachers.

The Definition of the Research Project

The general problem is based on the forgoing premises. The research question is to assess, in a specific First Nations school jurisdiction, teacher response to the suggestion (or the possibility) that teachers would be evaluated by Elders. I attempted to make this assessment by asking teachers to respond to a questionnaire. After the questionnaires were returned and tallied, I discussed the results with two small groups of teachers and with a group of Elders.

I was not interested in finding out exactly how many teachers would respond positively or negatively to each questionnaire item. The only characteristic of the teachers that I thought was appropriate to document, given the way I asked the research question, was that they were teachers in one of the reserve schools. In other words, I

had no hypothesis that there were would be differences amongst the teachers on the basis of their years of experience, whether or not they were Aboriginal or First Nations, their gender, their teaching level or any other thing about them. Those would be different research questions and I honestly thought that the most respectful way to show that to the respondents was to leave those kinds of identifying questions off the questionnaire.

Though I have shown percentages of responses for each item, that is not what this project has been about. I present them to describe the range between questionnaire items, not the incidence amongst teachers.

Limitations

The study is focused on one question. As an administrator, I have proposed that Elders from Samson Cree First Nation work with the teachers as evaluators in a process of formative evaluation. The single question that this study address is "what is the range of responses amongst teachers in the four schools operated by Nipisihkopahk Education Authority to that suggestion?". A questionnaire documents their range of responses and a series of interviews contextualized the patterns of response. Those results describe the responses of one group of teachers at a specific setting at a specific time and cannot be generalized to any other situation or group of teachers.

In this work I have told how I came up with the idea to ask the Elders I was working with in a First Nations community what they thought of the idea of their evaluating local teachers, in a formative evaluation context. It is really important for people who read this work not to interpret my rationale for the idea in this particular community with these particular Elders as a set of directions for setting up programs in other places. It is not meant to promote the practice of Elder evaluation of teachers as a general answer to a general problem. A program like that might work in some other place, but it would be developed on its own terms. My proposal in Samson Cree First Nation came about because of specific individuals and our unique relationships. While the idea can be considered elsewhere, it will be a completely different program in a different community. Put simply, a program like this has to be built on trust and respect.

The Organization of the Thesis

Chapter 2 is a discussion of how the concept of teacher evaluation by Elders developed. Before I began the project I completed an exhaustive bibliography about teacher evaluation in general in North America and explored the very limited literature about teacher evaluation in First Nations education. I also reviewed existing Provincial policies concerning teacher evaluation. That work formed part of the larger project but is not central to the research question of this project, so I have not presented it as a literature review in this work. Instead in Chapter 3 I present examples of literature that point to the problem and to the solution I have proposed. Chapter 4 presents the rationale for the design of this research project and discusses the methodology, and the results are presented in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 is a summary discussion of the findings and implications.

CHAPTER 2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT FOR THIS PROJECT

Why Teacher Evaluation

The idea to involve Elders in teacher evaluation came from my observation of a larger issue. I saw that in many situations the students themselves did not have access to the most important information about their own community. It was the kind of information that can not be put in a curriculum or lesson plan: it is the knowledge that comes from spending time around people who know. It comes from knowing people, not knowing facts.

Community dynamics and family relationships in any community can provide access to information about the real heart of the community but sometimes community dynamics can also effectively keep students away from that information. I have seen in many of the communities in which I have worked that the Elders, the people who carry the knowledge, were unable to get to the students who required it. The question then arises as to whether or not the schools in the community might provide the occasion and place for young people in school to spend the kind of time in the company of Elders that would allow them to learn from them on cultural terms set out by the Elders.

Ideally at least the school should not be a place that is so separate from the community that it is a world unto itself, where the uniqueness of the community and its culture is not even accounted for in the school. The history of First Nations schooling in Canada shows that a major problem has been that the institution, the school, often has little reference to the reality of the community. The explicit or implicit message provided by the school is that the culture is a problem.

If the school is not a negative force in the community or the lives of the children, as it has been for so many years in First Nations schooling in Canada, we might consider that it should at least be a neutral area—neutral in terms of either culture conflict or conflict within the community—and that in that neutral area teachers will naturally take the initiative to communicate and educate effectively, to communicate in terms that are consistent with community norms, and make sure that students have access to cultural knowledge.

In fact, in my experience, without explicit policies that bring Elders, teachers, and students together, most of the time Elders will not be in the school or the classroom in any meaningful way. I never had to explain the necessity of communicating in community terms, or the involvement of Elders in schooling, to a teacher who was an effective communicator (and by "effective" I mean that they have a high degree of success in working with students). But I saw otherwise effective and committed teachers try to find what they thought was culturally salient information on their own and almost bury themselves in the effort. I saw them, with the best of intentions, get inappropriate culture information or misinformation and act on it.

For that reason it occurred to me that the first place for Elders to work on a continuing basis was with teachers. Teachers need to spend time around people who know, too. And teachers need to know that the Elders' voices they hear are authoritative and authentic. They need to be able to trust the sources of their information. Moreover, they need to feel comfortable with it, to know they are working in an atmosphere where they are not held accountable for things over which they have no power. They need to know that they will not be called to account for cultural insensitivity or cultural

inappropriateness when they have not had the opportunity to know the community in which they teach and its culture.

Of all the things we do on a continuing basis in schools, teacher evaluation suggested itself to me as the best place to get Elders working with teachers. In order to develop the proposal and the plan, I reviewed all the information I could find about both formative and summative teacher evaluation, the legal and administrative requirements and protocols of teacher evaluation, and teacher attitude about being evaluated.

General Differences Between Summative and Formative Evaluation

Summative evaluation is a common practice and each school, school board, or large jurisdiction has its own policies about it with respect to the rationale, the type of evaluation that is to be performed, and the circumstances for it, and who is to do it. A typical pattern of summative evaluation would be for the school or larger jurisdiction, at the end of the year or some time before contracts are renewed, either a third party evaluator or someone from the upper echelons of administration who has a senior degree or other high credential goes into the classroom, observes, and using some criteria established in policy judges the ability of the teacher. There may be repeated visits. Summative evaluation is a performance evaluation and it is usually a formal process.

From a teacher's experiential perspective, a typical summative evaluation takes place after receiving a formal letter from the jurisdiction asking the teacher to confirm a date for formal evaluation. That usually takes place some time between February and the end of the year. A teacher usually tries to make sure that everything is ready: lesson plans, background material, resources, and a clean room. Sometimes the teacher who wears sweat suits and T-shirts the rest of the year wears a suit on evaluation day. It is my impression, from reading many of the evaluations, that evaluators pay a lot of attention to classroom climate and classroom control. Evaluators usually try to assess how well a teacher communicates and whether or not the students understand the content, and how the content relates to the formal program of studies.

A good example of formative evaluation with teachers is the way that administrators team up an experienced teacher with an intern, an interim teacher, or a new teacher. It is usually a practical process, not necessarily a formal one, an attempt to provide support and the opportunity to learn and improve to new teachers. Many beginning teachers suffer from "the first year blues": the words to those blues are "am I being effective enough?". The first year for a teacher can be one of self doubt. As an administrator I would say that most first year teachers have deep misgivings: it is hard to keep up the pace and they sometimes burn themselves out. A good administrator acts to make learning and support resources available to a first year teacher or any teacher who really needs to improve their practice. Especially when a beginning teacher's first assignment is in a First Nations community or a school on a reserve, teachers can get jaded fast. In formative evaluation, whether it is formal or not, some observer or mentor gives the teacher (not necessarily the administration) formal or informal evaluation with the object of documenting a suggestion for improvement, or providing knowledge about how to make positive changes in teaching styles and strategies. I believe that a major aspect of an administrator's responsibility is to make sure that processes of formative evaluation take place in the school on a continuing basis.

I believe that it is a good idea for some provision for formative evaluation to be stated in policy, and that formal programs should be instituted in the schools for it. That is because this process of formative evaluation is supposed to be built in—the norm—but it often does not occur. Most school boards just do not have the resources or the staff to do effective formative evaluation. It is labour-intensive process: most of the time the principal and senior teachers are just too busy. I am not making excuses for them: in my opinion it remains a priority.

When formative evaluation is not a part of policy, what usually happens is that a teacher with the "first year blues" or its equivalent either gets a lot worse or gets rescued by a mentor, a friend or friends from within the teaching staff. Peer support that is informally negotiated amongst teacher friends is a really important part of teacher formation.

Teacher Evaluation, Teacher Isolation, and Elders as Evaluators

In my experience, formal summative teacher evaluation, the way we have done it in the past, does not really address community needs. Someone—often an outside consultant or specialist—comes into the classroom three or four times, observes, and makes an evaluative report; it is an archaic process. Most administrations in First Nations communities do not have the personnel resources to complete formal formative evaluation programs so what we have are informal systems of peers and administrators, mentoring. When there are few people in that informal process who really know the community, informal systems of formative teacher evaluation may well be places were misinformation about the community is perpetuated.

Our usual process of teacher evaluation is like an old model that has been revamped and repainted, then revamped and repainted again. We keep trying to change it but it is still the same old process. These patterns and processes of teacher evaluation—formal summative evaluation and informal formative evaluation with peers—do not reflect community needs. In either current practice (formal summative evaluation and informal peer formative evaluation) there is no way to evaluate how well a pattern of instruction is conducive to the student relating to the community.

In band controlled schools, is there a reason to do summative and/or formative evaluation of teachers?

The first reason that comes to mind for summative evaluation is that the community needs to have some control over who the people are who are standing in front of the classroom. Summative evaluation has a function in the larger system as a rough indicator of competence. It is something with which teachers are familiar. Therefore they may be somewhat more comfortable with it than with formative evaluation.

I think that formative and summative evaluation have to work together. I think that formative evaluation should occur at least biweekly, with the evaluator's and teacher's observations recorded on a chart or some other visual means. That way a record of formative evaluation could constitute a record of teacher improvement and would be a more reliable indicator, or summary, of teacher competence.

If we combine summative and formative evaluation, and include a strategy for giving teachers some tools for teaching that fit with the community, I propose that Elders have to be not just involved in evaluation but that they have to be the primary

evaluators. Here is the crux. Teachers working on their own in a classroom are isolated. Summative evaluation by an outsider does nothing to remedy that isolation. Peer support breaks through the isolation but there is no way to make sure that it happens or that it happens right, and because the support comes from peers, whose primary focus is on their own classrooms, there are neither time nor resources to do it on the scale that we need. For a community Elder who knows the community and knows the students to offer to work with a teacher in a supportive way (and formative evaluation by its nature has to be supportive even when it may be challenging), would be a major remedy for teacher isolation.

Teacher Response to Summative and Formative Evaluation

In my experience, many teachers like summative evaluation. It is the accepted way at present for teachers to get formal feedback. After two or three evaluations a teacher usually has a good idea of whether or not they have what it takes to be a good teacher. Summative evaluation, for a teacher who has been through the process, can confirm that teacher's idea of herself or himself as a good teacher.

On the other hand, I think it might be quite difficult for a teacher with 20 years of experience to face formative evaluation, especially if the formative evaluation program called for some kind of observation and recording every two weeks. Because the objective of formative evaluation is improvement, documenting those areas might be seen by the teacher as focusing on their weaknesses. That might be particularly hard for senior staff. Yet in terms of communicating with reserve students, or knowledge of reserve communities, many senior staff members need as much help as beginning teachers.

Why Evaluation as a Place for Elders?

Teacher evaluation is not an administrative area that many people think of as a fitting one for Elders. If we assume that teachers need local and traditional knowledge, as appropriate, from Elders, the first strategy that comes to mind is "in-service training." Another area for inclusion of Elders is in curriculum preparation. If we assume that Elders have something to share with teachers about the process of communication, we might even think of "lesson planning" as an appropriate area in which to ask Elders to work with teachers. But those areas are too restricted. They confine Elders to an existing paradigm about how to teach and what to do in classrooms.

As well, there will be some teachers who would not take Elders' contributions seriously on the basis that most Elders do not have degrees or professional teaching credentials. Some teachers will recognize that Elders have more than the equivalent of a degree in terms of knowledge. It is the first group of teachers that might need the Elders most, without realizing it.

Elders already play an important formal role in many reserve and band-controlled schools. They typically come to school by invitation on special days where the focus is on culture. In some schools they come in once or twice of week and may sit in on classrooms. There are programs where teachers may be encouraged to ask Elders questions, or make them accessible to students. There is usually no follow-up to that kind of Elder involvement and no necessary continuity. I believe we need a venue where it is expected that Elders may ask the questions.

I believe that involving Elders in teacher evaluation would completely transform the process of evaluation from something that is basically critical to something that is basically supportive. Instead of evaluation being a summative report that takes place near the end of the year, based on an occasional or one-time visit by an outsider, we could see Elders involved in a day to day basis, evaluating with the single and complex focus of making things better and more appropriate for the students by giving teachers appropriate insight, knowledge, and skill.

A major reason to ask Elders to be the formative evaluators is so that teachers and administrators take what Elders have to say and how they say it seriously. To my knowledge, a program of teacher evaluation by Elders has never been tried before. Existing provincial, district, and school board policies that cover teacher evaluation make no provision for this kind of thing, unless, at an evaluator's discretion, an Elder might be involved. After an exhaustive search of the published and unpublished literature in education, I came to the conclusion that it has not even been suggested before. I believe it is worth trying.

Teacher reaction to it is crucial. That is why I developed this research project.

The Research Project

One impediment to the effectiveness of a program in which Elders evaluate teachers is that teachers may be defensive. Some may think that because most Elders do not have formal training in education, they do not (or should not) have the authority to make evaluative judgements about teaching strategies, organization, or behaviour. That attitude would defeat the purpose of bringing those who know, the Elders, together with those who need to know, the teachers. I developed this research project as a way of finding out just what kind of opinions teachers might have about the proposition.

This study was designed to explore the range of opinion about how the teachers in a specific First Nations school system on a reserve might feel about the suggestion that Elders could work with them in formative evaluation process.

CHAPTER 3. PREVIOUS SCHOLARLY APPROACHES TO THIS TOPIC

Background

Some time before I started this study a teacher in one of the reserve schools told me about something that frustrated and perplexed her. She said that just a few minutes into any lesson she loses the students; they just turn off or tune out. She said that the first few minutes of any interaction went well but then rapidly became an instance of her just talking to herself. She is an articulate good speaker and she has a good command of the curriculum. She usually talks fairly fast. I saw a well qualified, earnest teacher and knew that the students were not tuning her out because of what she said or who she was. It had to be because of how she said it.

When she told me about her frustration in communicating with the children I thought of something that an Elder from Saddle Lake had told me about fast and slow speech. He said that when he visits in one of the communities in Northern Alberta the people speak Cree so fast he has to scramble mentally to keep up with them. By the same token, when he visits in Hobbema, the people speak Cree so slowly and with such a clear steady rhythm that, he said, it has been hard sometimes not to drift off to sleep. (Please do no interpret what he said or my report of it as an authoritative description of the speed of speech in Cree in either of those places, and please do not think that the implication here is for teachers to evaluate the speed at which people speak and then adjust.)

I told my teacher friend to try presenting the same material in the same way but to slow down her speech—even to think of a metronome in the background—and see whether or not it made any difference. It did. She told me it had made a complete difference. I stopped in her classroom and watched her. It did work. She had the students' attention and they had hers. They were communicating. I discussed this with a dear and respected Elder, who has since passed away, and she confirmed that I had given the teacher the right advice. The Elder approached the teacher and told her so. Without much in the way of preface or explanation the Elder simply went to the teacher and told her to keep speaking slowly when she presented her lessons. I had to laugh when I looked back on this three-way conversation. I was the first to articulate it but I believe that the other two saw this as evidence of an important point: Elders have a central role in showing all of us how to communicate in human terms in school. When I say "in human terms" I mean in terms that First Nations people understand as a holistic context of respect: interconnected respect for one's self, respect for others, respect for life and creation. That implies a profound and basic change in school operation because at present we do not have an effective way to provide place and time for Elders to teach this basic idea, nor to ensure that teachers take account of what the Elders can provide for them.

If Elders have a central role in showing all of us how to communicate respectfully as human beings in school, it makes sense to me that they start by working along with teachers. That is because we operate schools as though the educational process starts when teachers talk, and keeps going as teachers direct or manage others' communication.

My answer is to ask the Elders if they can become the teachers' evaluators. I hope that this does not come across as cynical or patronizing because it is based on my

experience as both a teacher and an administrator. Teachers are faced with too much to do and too few resources in a context of multiple demands. There are all kinds of teachers. But the one time and place where almost all teachers give their full attention is to issues involving evaluation of their performance, especially when that evaluation has something to do with their tenure or promotion.

Decisions about tenure and promotion are almost always made on the basis of some kind of formal summative evaluation of teacher competence. That kind of evaluation is an area where teachers are subject to control. It is unfortunate that evaluation of teacher competence is an area with so much potential for being threatening. When summative teacher evaluation has a place in a First Nations school, I believe Elders should be involved in the process, but summative evaluation is not what I propose.

Formative evaluation is an entirely different process with different though possibly related objectives. It is something we already do in schools, though we do not do it enough, and it occurred to me that it was a perfect place for teachers and Elders to meet with the common objective of learning how to communicate respectfully in school.

Academic Literature

My first intention when searching and reviewing academic sources and data bases was to see if anyone else had researched or written about indigenous Elders being involved in teacher education, in-service teacher training, or teacher evaluation. I found a number of statements in the literature that describe programs or initiatives in which general mention is made of Elders being involved in education but I found nothing at all about Elders being involved in teacher in-service, teacher education, or teacher evaluation. Thinking that I might not have searched in the right way, I asked two professional researchers, independently, to do searches. They came to the same conclusion. The fact that it does not seem to be reported in academic literature does not mean that it is not happening.

In the end I found a representative collection of academic works that speak to the heart of the issue that I was trying to raise, and I will discuss those later. First I want to discuss some false starts and the context for those false starts.

False Starts

Starting with the other side of the proposition, evaluation of teaching performance, I found a huge scholarly literature. It has a long history in the literature because summative teacher evaluation has been a part of school administration since the beginning. Following a teacher's direction, I attempted a summary and a synthesis of 125 scholarly publications about teacher evaluation from the past 30 years. In brief general terms, what I found is that the area is full of problems, especially when scholars attempt to relate teacher evaluation to measures of teacher effectiveness or to student outcomes. I found discussions about who is best qualified to evaluate teaching and teachers, with no real consensus. Most important, I found generally in the literature that in summative teacher evaluation, knowing what to observe and how to measure or document it is a complex unresolved issue. I believe that generally in the literature, during the past ten years, there has been a growing awareness that improvement in

schools and outcomes will probably be based on formative evaluation, rather than summative evaluation. There are some great examples of local formative evaluation processes from specific jurisdictions. What I take from that observation is that locales and communities differ and formative teacher evaluation should start with knowing the community in which it is done. There is a general movement toward formative evaluation in North America, but there is no consensus in the literature about exactly what it is or how to do it. Again, the specifics are local.

I found no research published about teacher evaluation in First Nations schools.

The reason I have not provided reference to individual publications in the areas of teacher evaluation is because that scholarly area is not the subject of this project. This project is about Elders—the range of opinion in a group of teachers responding to the suggestion that Elders be their evaluators in a formative evaluation setting. The subject of this study is the relationship between teachers and Elders.

I completed a data base of my own about teacher evaluation, which includes some general discussions of the history and current situation in Canada about First Nations schooling. Because it forms a background to the study, I have included some of the most useful references in a general bibliography to this work, keeping it separate from the references to works cited. Though that work did not contribute to this project it had a practical outcome. By policy, convention, and regulation, teachers in the local authority where I worked were required to be observed and evaluated (i.e., in summative evaluation). The criteria for evaluation and the areas of observation had been set out on a large table, a kind of check list. Having surveyed the literature in detail, I was able to revise the local observational protocols and evaluation criteria to reflect the local conditions better, to be less threatening and more helpful to teachers, and to document for teachers and parents the expectations we had of the teachers.

Examples from the Literature

Here are some examples from the literature of where my premises and this project fit. Each one of them represents a thread or a theme in the literature that relates to this project.

Teachers' and students' cultural background

An unpublished work by Ladson-Billings and Darling-Hammond (2000) is a good example of a complex tradition in the academic literature that discusses cultural difference and teacher effectiveness. They do it in the context of urban schools. Their argument is like mine in that they extend the discussion of teacher and student cultural background to take account of teachers' attitudes about students and the implications that spring from that. They maintain the position that the literature and empirical evidence confirm conclusively that more successful teaching occurs when teachers and students share cultural background and experience. They say that successful teachers emphasize the whole child and know their students' cultural norms. It is not just that those teachers understand the students, it has something to do with teachers' attitudes about students. They say that teachers who can communicate with students in culturally relevant terms make demands for academic success for all students, rather than make assumptions about some students being "at-risk" students. On the matter of culturally relevant teachers in urban schools they say:

> In many urban classrooms there is a strict line of demarcation between students and teachers. In fact, some have likened urban schools to prisons with the students as inmates. However, culturally relevant teachers work to deliberately blur the borders between themselves and their students. (p. 7)

They say that the research identifying effective urban teachers shows that the breadth and range of the "knowledge" that students must "construct," and "deconstruct" and "reconstruct," has been defined in much broader terms by effective urban teachers than in the system generally (p. 8). To use Ladson-Billings and Darling-Hammond's terms, I would say that to be an effective teacher in a First Nations reserve school, the teacher has to deconstruct, and reconstruct, and demonstrate how to construct specific information for students. For students to understand a non-aboriginal way of learning, the teachers have to be trained by someone who can evaluate this perspective or it will seem that he or she is subversive.

Learning style and cognitive style

There is a large literature that deals with learning styles and culture. The conceptual framework gets fairly messy in that discussion. There is a problem in dealing with the observation that different cultures provide for ways of learning that may be different and at the same time consistent in some respects with the learning styles of other cultures. One of the consequences of poor definition in this literature is that if a teacher or researcher assumes that if we can define the characteristics or dynamics of a learning style of a culture, like the Plains Cree culture of the reserve in the 21st century, we can look at an individual student in that culture and know or predict how that student will learn. An article by Peter Murrell (1990) tries to address this problem. He says that the usefulness of the construct of cultural learning styles is definitely not in the ascription of cognitive characteristics to individuals, but in providing a framework to describe potential miscommunication in learning interactions (p. 49). I take his discussion to imply that Elders can address an experienced teacher in those terms, to ask them to think in terms of cognitive style and learning style from a Cree perspective, to objectify that perspective to themselves, and then to think in terms of the interaction that involves both teacher and student—not just the supposed characteristics of the student.

Formative evaluation in Native education

Robert Este presented a paper at the 1984 meeting of the Mokakit Native Education Research Association that is a start in the direction in which I wanted to head. The paper introduces the concept of clinical supervision as a formative tool for "fine tuning" already familiar teaching techniques and explores the implications of ethnocentrism in using clinical supervision in Native Indian education. He discusses methods of evaluating in the cycle of clinical supervision and identifies two foundations for the process: a healthy supervisor-supervisee relationship, and an understanding of criteria of effective teaching.

This looks like it would speak directly to the proposal I have made for Elders to be the formative evaluators of teachers: it confirms the suggestion that it would work well only if there were a really good relationship between the Elder and the teacher, and that both shared an "understanding of criteria for effective teaching."

My criticism of the paper, however, is that it is framed from a perspective that sees Native education as a failure—not in its own terms. He sees failure—I see a vibrant historical account of a people in a community. The application of criteria in clinical supervision must not be done in terms of the ethnocentric patters of the non-Native establishment but should follow the direction of an Elder from the community. The criteria have to come from the Elder. Otherwise we will repeat failure.

Problems with the education system in the community could be less if the community could evaluate formatively. The clinical supervision models of Goldhammer (1969) and Cogan (1976) would be to me the best ways of approaching a culturally sensitive process which would rely on a good or positive relationship between the Elder and the certified teacher.

This raises for me a question about training and certification. Maybe we need a special certification for teachers whose teacher education has included training by Elders—a certification in First Nations education, accomplished not in the context of teacher training but in clinical supervision.

The recognition of Indigenous models

The axioms that reinforce the cultural background of First Nations education are all through the literature, a very large literature. By way of example I cite a discussion by Farrell-Racette, Goulet, Pelletier and Shmon (1996), who begin by distinguishing between systems of informal and formal education and say that each First Nation had its own such systems:

> Cultural survival was ensured as values, beliefs and traditions were passed from one generation to the next. Education was not fragmented; holistic knowledge was the framework for the curriculum. Education was a life-long process concerned with the simultaneous and balanced development of the mind, body, emotions and the spirit. It was believed that all children came into the world with their own gifts or talents and it was the responsibility of adults to recognize and nurture those gifts. p.24

Their discussion dovetails with the way I have been taught: learning begins with the mother, at conception, and progresses to others in the nuclear and extended family to others, such as teachers, in the community. The informal system is effected by general involvement amongst family, friends, and others: role development and many skills are learned in the informal system.

We may have a tendency to think of the formal system as being reserved for teachers. In indigenous systems, much of what people learn from their family and others in the community is in fact highly structured and complex. In many contexts, learning from other family members and community members is based on a formal commitment between the traditional teacher and the student. It includes formally articulated concepts of pedagogical theory and child development. Formal education is not the domain of the school. By the same token, teachers in school are involved in informal education as well.

The authors of the article cited above say that the colonization process, and the deliberate destruction of the indigenous educational institutions had a devastating effect on the First Nations:

> Knowledge, values and belief systems were passed on and explanations of the world around them were retold to each generation of young leaders.
>
> The colonization process and deliberate destruction of these educational institutions had a devastating effect. However, it is important to recognize that traditional pedagogy survives, particularly when one seeks traditional knowledge and skill from an Elder or individual with cultural expertise. As we travel forward and explore solutions for the ongoing critical state of First Nations and Metis Education, many First Nations Elders, Educators and Communities are advocating the restoration and revitalization of Indigenous pedagogy. p. 24

Respect: A basic concept in Indigenous models of education

I have been humbled and privileged to have the counsel and instruction of thoughtful Elders about this topic. In other writing I have expressed the basics of what I have been taught in a formal model, but to present that model in this work would take the focus from this research project. A good way to generalize about Indigenous education models is by referring to a doctoral research project completed by V. Delgado in 1997. It is based on interviews with Elders, because, in Delgado's words:

> [T]he only way for educators to know what manifests itself among indigenous people concerning human nature in the concrete is to ask the indigenous teachers of the culture, the philosophers, the wisdom keepers. In the open-ended questions of qualitative research the interviewee has the freedom to speak uninhibitedly about the colorful, spiritual existence of his or her realities. When, and only when, we receive the living materials from these elders that make up the foundations of educating Native children will we have the opportunity to develop a continuing theoretical base addressing Native American education. p.4

That passage leads to a discussion of the concept of natural law, and the idea that natural law can be understood, as required, in one's own terms. There is a clear pedagogical principle that respect for knowledge is based on the relationship of the learner and teacher. Respect is the first principle: Delgado summarizes the study:

> Four themes emerged as a result of this study:
>
> 1. The concept of respect is referred to and is applied to everyday living and lifeways. It is so highly revered among the participants that they believe that no kind of learning or teaching could go on without it.
>
> 2. Spirituality is a cultural principle that permeates every aspect of Native life, as taught to the participants by their relatives and ancestors.
>
> 3. The participants profess that family relationships among most native people have always included extended family.
>
> 4. The participants report that many educational approaches were the most powerful agents in influencing the world view and personal philosophies among native people. p. 11

This theme of respect appears in many discussions about relationships, and is clearly one of the most important concepts in indigenous ideas about education. For example, in a study of rural students' attitudes about teachers, Greg Pater (1955) says

> Students ... stressed that it was important for teachers to treat students with respect and to teach responsibility. .... Students felt that the most important teacher qualities were respect, kindness, positive attitude, patience, and sense of humor, and that teachers should avoid talking too fast, making fun of Native culture, and giving boring lectures.

and went on to include, in summary:

> [A]n understanding that cognitive style, learning style, and cultural style are best thought of as a layered continuum moving from cognitive style (which is the individual's disposition in thinking, perceiving and processing information), to learning style (which is how those dispositions manifest in learning activity), to cultural style (which is the manifestation of learning styles as cultural induced patterns of style in particular socio-cultural contexts). p.50

The assigning of particular styles would not be the conclusion but a means of assisting teachers to learn the patterns of the learners or students that they are a part of. Regardless of what teachers perceive as the best method of teaching First Nations peoples, they must first understand the foundation of knowledge from the Keepers of Wisdom.

Elders involved in teacher education and training

I took notice of Glenn Latham's (1984) observation that there were a lot of differences amongst classrooms, and his idea that it was possible to administratively reduce the possibility of bad teaching: "In school systems where school policy and instructional supervision are well defined and operation, idiosyncrasies can be moderated so that the variance between comparable classrooms within the system is reduced" (p. 27). What he is getting at in his article as that teachers left to their own devices, without adequate evaluation, will create their own methods and curricula, and so forth, which will have a detrimental effect on the students.

Marjane Ambler (1999) has an example from a program in North Dakota of what appears to be a successful synthesis of administration and teacher education that is premised on the expectation that the college faculty and administrators "walk in two worlds." They seem to be able to teach from both worlds—the precepts from the other institutions of higher learning where they were trained, and the reservations where they come from. They are building a teacher education program that bridges between two worlds, meeting state and national accreditation and also meeting the needs of the reservation students. The program is new but is a step in the right direction. If we follow Latham's warning, though, if the teachers are not monitored they may follow their own devices.

Summary

It seems that colonialism and government rhetoric have created a no-win method of teaching First Nations schools today. In that context, Verna Kirkness (1998) calls for a returning to the knowledge of the Elders of a community by recognizing that what the Elders have to give students (and teachers) is not restricted to informal education. We

should not limit Elder involvement in education, then, to informal meetings. Kirkness calls for recognizing the formal education Elders provide, and have always provided, and recognizing the formal nature of community validation of Elder knowledge, within the formal structure of the school. It may be difficult to do, but it seems that existing policies and formalities get in the way of teaching students on First Nations reserves, and unless we change our methods we will be perpetuating the failure of the schools, past, present and future.

Kirkness says

> The rhetoric goes on and on. We expound on the importance of our Elders. We say they are our teachers, our libraries, our archives, yet we rarely include them in a meaningful way. We rarely ask them anything. We are great at having our Elders come to say a prayer or tell a story, but surely this is not what we mean when we say we must learn from the Elders. Elders possess the wisdom and knowledge that must be focus of all our learning. It is through them that we can understand our unique relationship to the creator, our connection with nature, the order of things, and values that enhance the identity of our people. Not properly acknowledging the Elders is probably the most serious mistake we make as we attempt to create quality education for our people. p. 13

Kirkness warns us to include Elders in every aspect we can in education. My proposal to ask Elders to be the formative evaluators of teachers recognizes the power that Elders have and creates a context within an existing structure, formative teacher evaluation, for the incorporation of an ancient formal relationship.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

Problem formulation

I was the senior administrator of the locally controlled school system on Samson First Nation Reserve at the time this project was undertaken. Administration includes providing resources for the professional development of the teachers. Many of the teachers in that system seemed to me to feel that they were not part of the community, and in fact felt a kind of barrier to being part of it. In a reserve school, not being a community member can be a problem because reserve life is based on strong ties amongst and between families, and because so much of the quality of community life depends on participation, or lack of participation, in local traditions.

As discussed in Chapter 1, it occurred to me that one avenue of professional development for teachers could be to involve Elders as evaluators in formative evaluation of teachers. That could provide a way for teachers to learn about the community, through a formative evaluation system that brought the teachers and Elders together. That seemed to me to be the best way to allow the teachers access to the community on terms that respected both the teachers and the community. Yet I saw that teachers who had misgivings or who were reluctant to recognize an Elder's authority would not profit from that kind of intervention. I wanted to find out what the range of teacher opinion was, within the group of teachers working in the four schools that I administered. This research project was designed to assess the range of teacher opinion or attitude, amongst the teachers and principals in this particular reserve school system, about such a proposal. In the process I knew I would find out their opinions about Elders' involvement in schooling in general. Questionnaire responses provided new questions for interviews of both teachers and Elders.

Researcher's Role

When I undertook the study my role in the community was that of acting superintendent of schools but I had worked in the community in other capacities before being appointed in that role. My role was therefore not exclusively associated with the school but originated in my participation and involvement as a community member. I was both a participant in the community and an observer of it. I had formed many friendships and acquaintances within the community, and those relationships were social and cultural, not professionally related to research. I have friends there. People knew me and though it is not the community in which my family originated people in the community know who I am, and many of them know my extended family members. What I am trying to express is that the research relationship was built on trust, and that trust could only exist because people in the community knew me. That trust was built with the participants and the community by establishing good rapport.

This is really important: I didn't build that rapport in order to do the research. it was a by-product of just being myself and working in a visible position in the community. I was accepted as an administrator, but more than that I was accepted as a person. In order to be accepted as a researcher I had to demonstrate my competence in research to the Elders. They would have been reluctant to assist in research with strangers, but told me that they would work with me because they knew me. I felt very involved in the study and in the community. The trust and the friendship remains much

more important than the research outcome, but the research process was built on an existing relationship of trust.

Before I completed the research, I resigned from the administrative position and moved to another jurisdiction.

Data Collection Methods

The study employs a questionnaire and a round of interviews, but it is based on the assumptions of narrative enquiry as a research method. That is, I began with a premise that people seem to construct their own understanding from what they have experienced and from what they learn. This means that I assumed that each teacher or principal in the study would have a unique understanding of the questions and the implications for his/her school and community. Since experiences are integral parts of such knowledge the individual teacher's values would be an integral part of this understanding. The assumption of narrative enquiry also applies to the information provided by the Elders in interviews, as they individually provided their insight, wisdom, and direction for application in the study.

There are two main data sources in this research project, a questionnaire and a round of unstructured interviews. With the questionnaire I wanted to document a range of teacher opinion about whether the professional staff thought that it would be appropriate or useful to ask Elders to be involved in formative teacher evaluation. I wanted to create a questionnaire that was easy and straightforward to respond to, and one that would encourage the teachers to articulate their ideas, criticisms, encouragement, or misgivings about that proposal. I thought the questionnaire could be a vehicle for them to say just what professional areas they thought Elders might contribute to. The next phase of the research involved relatively informal interviews with teachers, principals, and Elders. I planned to base the interviews on the questionnaire responses.

The Questionnaire

Appendix 1 is a copy of the questionnaire. The introduction sets the tone by asking for comments on "a suggestion for formative teacher evaluation." The "suggestion" is described this way:

> It has been suggested that a good way to increase the relevance of schooling in Samson First Nation, and to meet the school's mandate of cultural relevance, would be to give teachers the opportunity to learn by working with an Elder who knows the culture. If this were to be implemented, it would take the place of formative teacher evaluation. An Elder would observe classes and then provide comments, in the form of discussion, for the teacher, from the perspective of the traditional and current culture of the community.

The introduction to the questionnaire is clear that participation in the research project is completely voluntary, that it is not just confidential but anonymous, and no one will know who responds and who does not. It also tells the teachers that the research results will form the basis for further discussion of the possibility of

implementing "just such a program," and that the results will be reported in my master of education thesis project.

On the introductory page of the questionnaire, I also provided working definitions of two terms, "Elder" and "Formative evaluation" (contrasting it to summative evaluation.)

In preparation for creating the items on the questionnaire I completed a comprehensive review of the literature in teacher evaluation in order to document first the kinds of processes that jurisdictions use and second the kinds of substantive areas of teacher evaluation.

The questionnaire asks that teachers choose amongst responses of "agree," "disagree," and " no opinion" for 14 propositions. Those propositions range from completely negative (e.g., "I am completely opposed" and "I see no reason to involve Elders in formative evaluation of teachers") to completely positive (e.g., "I think it would make a positive difference in the way we teach"), through several variations of qualification.

In between those two extremes are the response items that have the effect of refocusing the topic:

I would like to know more about this, because I think it might be helpful,

I would like to know more about Cree culture.

Three response items show qualified approval by setting up conditions:

I would only be comfortable with this if it were completely voluntary.

This sounds okay, but whether or not it works would depend on how it's done.

Okay—but only if it involved no great time commitment than our present load.

Two response items allow respondents to evaluate concerns about cultural appropriateness, implicitly from the standpoint of whether or not Cree culture can be respected in the process.

I am concerned that the school setting may not be the place for working with Elders.

I am concerned about observation of the appropriate cultural protocols in a program like this.

Two response items ask for judgements about statements that imply that the project might compromise the education process.

Cultural methods of education are not appropriate for the kinds of teaching we must do for students to achieve mastery of the school curriculum.

This would be inappropriate because most Elders do no have formal training in education.

One of the questions explicitly requests the teacher to make further comments, because agreement with this proposition shows a refocus of the question, but with the focus not specified:

There are better ways of achieving the same goal.

The second section asks for choices amongst three alternatives about the potential areas for Elder involvement in schooling, and asks the respondents to say whether or not they think that formative evaluation by Elders in the following areas would be "potentially valuable" or "not valuable" or whether the respondent had "no opinion":

classroom management and student behaviour

interaction with students

instructional strategies

lesson preparation and organization

a sense of history of the community

knowledge of the culture of the community

learning more about the current social dimensions of the community

Because the items are forced-choice items, a third section invited any written commentary that a respondent might have.

The questionnaire was given to all of the teachers (98) who had teaching positions with the Nipisihkopahk Education Authority, Samson Cree Nation, Hobbema Alberta. It was distributed to them in their school-system mailboxes, and they were asked to return the questionnaires anonymously through the school jurisdiction's internal mail system. After mail-sorting, they were returned to my mailbox. A secretary transcribed the written comments.

Interviews

The results (N=69) were tabulated. After the administration of the questionnaire and before I saw the tabulated results, I asked a number of teachers from amongst the staff to volunteer to participate in interviews. Initially I had assumed that 15 would be ideal. That number of participants allows for the inclusion of a range in teacher background, experience, and assignment. One conscious selection criterion for interview participants was informal recognition by peers of being a good teacher. I also asked a small number of community Elders if I could interview them, and those interviews were conducted, recorded, and reported according to Cree cultural protocols.

In fact in the end I conducted a interviews with 5 teachers, 1 principal, and 2 Elders, and asked them to comment on the proposal to involve Elders as evaluators, and to help me interpret the results of the questionnaires. I taped recorded the interviews but did not transcribe them. The interviews were informal and broad ranging.

The actual selection of teacher interview participants was based upon the recommendation of peers. I began asking teachers and principals if they could discuss the project with me. In the process of finding interview participants teachers and principals spoke to me about the project, so in fact I had a range of interview responses that went beyond the interviews. By the time I had agreement from 5 teachers and one administrator I could see no benefit in exploring the same territory with 9 more teachers, as I had originally planned. The 6 represented a good mix of backgrounds and

experience. By the same token, it would have been inappropriate, after having met with 2 Elders, to ask other Elders to do the same.

In preparation for the interviews, and using Spradley's (1979) guide for ethnographic study, I tried to create descriptive questions from the themes of the questionnaire. I interpreted the questionnaire data in terms of cultural renewal in the curricula and professional understanding of the staff. The study was explained in full to the Elders due to the complex nature of evaluation to them. The request of the Elders was to meet together in one location with no distractions. Overall the comfort level was very high and that was apparent from the amount of humor expressed in the room over the 2 days of Interviewing.

Each of the interview participants was asked to reflect on their personal experiences while living on the reserve, with a focus on the teacher evaluation process. I asked them to reflect on their own educational experiences and qualifications, and their perspectives for educational progress in First Nation communities.

Ethical considerations

I gave the board of the education authority a letter that explained the purpose and nature of the study, the format of gathering data, and the feedback and follow-up procedures that I expected to follow. In person, I explained my reasons for wanting to explore with teachers and Elders the possibility of bringing them together in the context of formative evaluation, and that before I did that I wanted to gauge both teacher and Elder opinion about the idea. The board gave its approval. I committed to provide the board with the results of the study, as well as a discussion of the implications.

I committed to all participants that confidentiality would be maintained for everyone except myself. Because I was superintendent, I did not want anyone to feel obligated to respond so I committed to distribute questionnaires, and provide for their collection, in such a way that I would have no idea who had responded. Moreover, because four schools were involved, I wanted to make sure that the questionnaires from all schools were pooled together so that I could not determine response patterns by school.

The results were tabulated as a set of descriptive statistics. I was not concerned about the relative number of different responses but about the range of opinions that the teachers showed. The results of the questionnaire and a summary of the interview findings are discussed in the following chapter. A step in reporting was to go back to Square One with the question and the results. Indigenous methods involve collaboration, thinking together. I asked a mentor to think and discuss the results and my analysis, with me, and to generate a list of questions and observations. That was an area in which I wanted to be truthful and direct. I tape-recorded a discussion of those questions, and they were transcribed. That transcription forms a major part of this thesis.

CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

Introduction

I have divided the description of the research process into four sequences. I model them on the sequence of the seasons. Each season moves without boundaries into the next and builds on what came before. This graphic artificially separates the seasons. Like the graphic, the description of the research process in this project implies an artificial separation of discrete phases. This research took place in four phases that built on what came before and the boundaries were not really discrete. In this chapter the seasons are treated as separate, as in the graphic. In the last chapter I hope they are reintegrated like the circle.

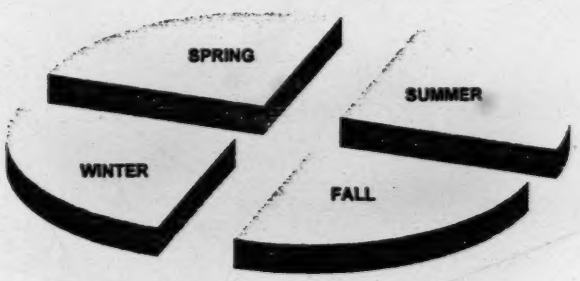

Figure 1. Four discrete seasons.

Summer

The first phase, the summer phase, began with building trust and rapport. That is not a research strategy because the objective of building trust and rapport was not in order to do the research. Having trust and rapport is the thing to value but I could not have done the research unless that trust was there. The first phase of implementing the research was to design the project itself; then explaining to the board, the administration, the teachers, and the elders, about the protocols of the research project, and finally administering the questionnaire and tabulating the responses.

Fall

After reviewing the responses I wanted to hear what some of the teachers thought of the results, to know how a selected group of good teachers would interpret the results. Six teachers were given a copy of the survey and asked to respond verbally to the questions, emphasizing their own point of view as teachers.

Winter

Winter is the season for stories to be told. That is why I centre the project in that season. Following the cultural protocol, Elders met with me and gave me advice and direction about the idea of Elders being involved in formative teacher evaluation.

Spring

Spring is a time of new life and rejuvenation. For that reason I think of the spring phase in a research process as the one where results are presented, and implications are dealt with. This is the phase that has meaning for growth and evolution in education, and for effects on furture generations.

In this Chapter I summarize Summer, Fall, and Winter. The remaining part of the thesis is Spring.

Summer: Focus on the Questionnaire

The return rate was 70%. That is, 98 questionnaires were sent out and 69 were returned. The questionnaires were anonymous so it seems to me that the people who responded were motivated to do so for the sole reason that they wanted to express an opinion. I anticipated a return rate of about 50% . I had no idea how the majority of the teachers would respond. Because teacher evaluation is a sensitive area it would not have surprised me if many of the teachers were completely against getting anyone but trained school administrators involved in evaluation. My initial research question was on the range of responses. I had thought that the most interesting part of the survey would be to see how teachers qualified whatever their answers were. In short, when I speculated on what the responses might be I expected the teachers to resist to the idea of Elders evaluating teachers or to qualify any positive opinion.

Research is very rewarding when the results show us things we never expected, give us new information, or give us new ways of thinking. This study documents a range that includes real teacher openness to the idea, even to the point that they remark on other areas where Elders could be helpful.

The results are tabulated Tables 1 and 2, below.

Teacher Desire to Know More About Cree Culture

Response to this question sets a context for interpreting the other items. Question 14 ("I would like to know more about Cree culture") had a high measure (81%) of agreement. No one disagreed with the proposition, though 19% indicated they had no opinion. It is impossible to interpret those responses any further.

Support For Elder Involvement Generally and in Teacher Evaluation

The teachers want Elders to be involved in education. The responses for Question 12 ("School setting may not be the place for working with Elders") show a large measure of teacher endorsement for Elders working with teachers in the school setting in some capacity, though not specifically in teacher evaluation: only 7% of the teachers agreed with the suggestion that the school setting might be an inappropriate place to work with Elders, and 78% of them rejected that suggestion.

They are relatively open to the idea of Elders evaluating teachers. The indicator of positive acceptance of having Elders involved specifically in teacher evaluation is Question 5 ("I think it would make a positive difference in the way we teach"): 66% of the respondents agreed with that statement, while 18% did not agree.

Question 1 ("I would like to know more about this, because I think it might be helpful") reveals a very high measure of teacher openness to the idea: 81% of the respondents agreed, and only 6% appeared to reject the idea out of hand.

Item	*Query*	*Percentage of Total Who*		
		Agree	*Do Not Agree*	*Have No Opinion*
1	Like to know more- might be helpful	81	6	13
2	I see no reason to involve Elders in teacher evaluation	30	48	22
3	Whether it works depends on how it's done	85	6	9
4	Completely opposed	7	66	27
5	Would make positive difference in the way we teach	65	18	18
6	Inappropriate because most Elders do not have education training	29	48	23
7	Cultural methods inappropriate for mastery of curriculum	20	65	15
8	If I could choose which Elder to work with	40	31	29
9	If it were completely voluntary	54	22	24
10	If there were no greater time commitment	58	20	23
11	There are better ways of achieving the same goal	9	22	69
12	School setting may not be the place for working with Elders	7	78	15
13	Concern about observation of cultural protocols	52	12	37
14	Like to know more about Cree culture	81		19

Table 1. Teachers' General Responses to Elders as Evaluators

Item	*Areas in Which Elders Could Contribute*	*Percentage of Total*		
		Potentially Valuable	*Not Valuable*	*No Opinion*
15	Classroom management & student behavior	90	6	4
16	Interaction with students	96	3	1
17	Instructional strategies	47	26	27
18	Lesson preparation & organization	35	49	17
19	Sense of history of community	100		
20	Knowledge of culture of community	100		
21	Learning more about the current social dimensions of community	96	2	3

Table 2. Teachers' Responses: Areas in Which Elders Could Contribute

Support For Elder Involvement Generally and in Teacher Evaluation

The teachers want Elders to be involved in education. The responses for Question 12 ("School setting may not be the place for working with Elders") show a large measure of teacher endorsement for Elders working with teachers in the school setting in some capacity, though not specifically in teacher evaluation: only 7% of the teachers agreed

teachers agreed with the suggestion that the school setting might be an inappropriate place to work with Elders, and 78% of them rejected that suggestion.

They are relatively open to the idea of Elders evaluating teachers. The indicator of positive acceptance of having Elders involved specifically in teacher evaluation is Question 5 ("I think it would make a positive difference in the way we teach"): 66% of the respondents agreed with that statement, while 18% did not agree.

Question 1 ("I would like to know more about this, because I think it might be helpful") reveals a very high measure of teacher openness to the idea: 81% of the respondents agreed, and only 6% appeared to reject the idea out of hand.

Opposition to Elder Involvement in Teacher Evaluation

Unqualified opposition to the idea is documented by the teachers who agreed with the statement in Question 4 ("I am completely opposed [to the idea of Elders being involved in teacher evaluation]"). Only 7% of the 69 teachers said they were completely opposed. Even more interesting, 66% of the respondents disagreed with that strong statement of opposition, which I interpret as being open at least to the general suggestion. The remaining 27% said they had no opinion.

Question 2 is not as strong in opposition as Question 4: "I see no reason to involve Elders in the formative evaluation of teachers," and 30% agreed with that statement. Yet almost half of the respondents (48%) disagreed—indicating that they accepted some rationale for Elder participation in teacher evaluation.

Questions 6, 7, 11 and 12 allow teachers to indicate the extent to which they agree with various rationales for questioning the appropriateness of Elder involvement. Questions 6 and 7 allow justification on the basis of Elder qualification and whether or not educational conventions and cultural methods can be combined, while Question 11 allows for a general or blanket statement about appropriateness. Question 12, on the other hand, questions the setting, not instructional or cultural method, nor Elder qualification.

Question 6. This would be inappropriate because most Elders do not have formal training in education.

Question 7. Cultural methods of education are not appropriate for the kinds of teaching we must do for students to achieve mastery of the school curriculum.

Question 11. There are better ways of achieving the same goal. (Comment on back)

Almost one third of the respondents agree in general terms with Questions 6 (29%), and one fifth agree with Question 7 (20%), but almost half (48%) of the respondents do not see "lack of qualification" as a reason for excluding Elders, and almost two thirds (65%) of the respondents reject the idea of incompatability between cultural methods and curriculum mastery. Only 9% of the respondents agree that there are better ways of achieving the same goal. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents had no opinion about Question 11.

Qualifications About How Elders' Evaluation of Teachers Might Work

The teachers are reasonably concerned about how a program of Elders evaluating teachers would work. The general question is Question 3 ("This sounds okay, but whether or not it works would depend on how it's done"), and 85% of the teachers agreed with that statement.

One major area of concern about the way in which it would be done is shown in Question 13 ("I am concerned about observation of the appropriate cultural protocols in a program like this"). Thirty-seven percent did not express an opinion here, but 52% of all respondents expressed agreement with that concern.

Conditional acceptance of the idea is suggested in Questions 8, 9, and 10:

Question 8. I would only be comfortable with this if I could choose which Elder to work with.

Question 9. I would only be comfortable with this if it were completely voluntary.

Question 10. Okay—but only if it involved no greater time commitment than our present load.

Many of the teachers (between 40% and 58%) expressed agreement with the qualifications in Questions 8, 9, and 10.

Areas in Which Elders Could Contribute

The teachers uniformly thought that if they played a role in teacher evaluation Elders could provide a sense of the history of the community and knowledge of the culture of the community. Almost all of the teachers thought that the Elders could help in learning more about the current social dimensions of the community.

In terms of the way that schools operate, and how Elders might help teachers through being involved in formative evaluation, most of the teachers saw Elders' contributions in the areas of classroom management and student behaviour and in interaction with students. There is a sharp division amongst the respondents, though, on how Elders might help teachers in purely pedagogical areas. Almost half the teachers (47%) considered that Elders, working as evaluators, could contribute in the area of instructional strategies, and only 26% appeared to think otherwise. But only 35% of the respondents thought that Elders evaluating teachers could contribute in the area of lesson preparation and organization, and half of them appeared to think that it would not be an inappropriate area.

Fall: Teacher and Principal Interviews

Interview with the teachers was a rewarding experience for the teachers and for me. The teachers and I were very comfortable together because we knew each other from our roles in the school system. After the questionnaire had been administered I asked for volunteers for interviewing. My sole criterion that they be good teachers, and I wanted to ensure that I had a good mix of First Nations, non-First Nations; community member, outsider; and primary and secondary teachers. I spoke with each of them on the phone to set up interviews. After the telephone conversations I arranged to hold some interviews away from the school in a nearby town. One group of teachers said

that they would be more comfortable away from the school. I later conducted five individual interviews at the school with a different group of teachers, during scheduled breaks when there would be minimal interruptions. The location was chosen on the basis of participant expression of preference for where they wanted to have a conversation with me. All the interviewees seem to be very popular among their peers and they are recognized by their peers as good teachers.

I summarize the interviews and make composite judgements.

It seemed like the whole staff bought into the study. It seemed that individually and as a team they understood the importance of the Elders in their community. I was, however, surprised at the different amounts of information that principals give their staff and how that affects teacher perception and school climate. At one school, the teachers had been completely briefed about the study and seemed to know much more about the system in general. At another school the teachers seemed to have been given minimal information. In my experience, keeping teachers well informed is a sign of good leadership in a principal, for they are the main controllers of the school.

That leads me to a first general observation based on the interviews. A program of this nature needs to be well thought out and clearly justified. More than that, it needs to be communicated effectively to all the teachers. They need to see the benefit and they need to see that what is happening is not arbitrary, and that it is not something that will remove even more control from them, particularly in any school where staff are not respected. This general consensus came from the teachers: when staff are not provided information they may appear to be suspicious and may not feel comfortable offering their opinion. In the case of this study, the interviews indicated to me that some of the reluctance to accept Elders as evaluators might come from a general lack of information that teachers have about their school and their system. Perhaps because of a general administrative climate, they may feel that Elders evaluating them will in some way threaten their positions. Perhaps, given that they may feel that they have little input into the school, it is possible that bringing in the Elders, especially in an evaluative capacity, will leave the teachers with even less power. That general climate extends beyond the school administration: those same teachers in a reserve school may feel threatened by community members, and always defensive, and would have even less response to the input of the community.

The teachers were also concerned that they might be judged on cultural criteria but would not have had access or information about the basis for judgement. The other side of that proposition is that having Elders assist in formative evaluation would ensure these teachers were taught appropriate information of the community. A consensus amongst the teachers was that we need to have much better ways of bringing the concerns of the community into the school and giving the teachers a way of learning more about the nature of the community in which they teach.

The teachers in the interviews shared many things to add clarity to their responses in the surveys. There is a wide, wide range of teacher knowledge and experience in the culture. Overall, they said that having the Elders in their classroom would be a great benefit to the students but that they saw themselves as the first ones to reap the rewards. They thought that it would help them, the teachers, get a much better understanding of the culture. Many of the teachers had a rudimentary understanding of the culture, but rudimentary is the operative word. Some had had such minimal cultural

experience that if it had been a positive experience or a negative one, they judged the whole culture by it. Some had experienced ceremonies. Some had not even attend a powwow, even when those were held close by the school and were almost hard to avoid.

One group of teachers who were interviewed saw nothing but benefit for Elders to be involved in teacher evaluation: they thought that the primary benefit would be for the students, and they said that they would be willing to have the Elders in the classroom everyday, on whatever terms the Elders specified. The other group of teachers would allow the Elders in if and only if certain conditions were met. I saw the implication that flows from that difference this way: school and community leadership should make it clear that the cultural flow, the integration of Natural Law as seen by our Cree culture, into our classes, has no negative repercussion on any teacher. We assume that the teachers' role is to work in the development of the students. I think that this aspect of the interviews shows that the community has to start with the leaders—primarily the principals—in educating them in a compassionate way to recognized that the cultural value of respect in action has to extend to the way that schools are operated, to the way that teachers are respected, so that teachers and principals alike can understand the role of Elders.

Principals are key. They must be shown, as an administrative and personal strategy, how to respect teachers. That sets the tone and the school climate. It is in that kind of climate where the staff can feel comfortable enough to understand the work of the Elders, who are holders of the information of the community. As an example of this, one of the principals in the system in which the study took place was well versed in the ceremonies of the Cree people and was able to help the staff to overcome fear. The teachers from that school were overwhelmingly positive to the suggestion that Elders might be their formative evaluators.

The way that a project innovation like this is introduced can make it into a threatening and mysterious unknown future for a teacher: if the Elders do not feel comfortable with the staff because they seem distant to them and if the comfort level is low, the respondents will not share their experiences openly. Do we need intermediaries or cultural advisors to help to break down the barriers of the fear and mistrust which can characterize, for many reserve teachers, what it is like to enter and work within the community?

This was brought up and discussed in the interviews: there are some almost intangible, subjective, but fundamentally accurate indicators of school environment, and that environment indicates how the school is performing: the smiles of the students and staff cohesion. The teachers told me that some staff in one of the schools felt uncomfortable and fearful for their positions, and that one could feel it in the hallways and in the voices of the staff. I confirm that subjective judgement.

None of the teachers that I interviewed have tenure. They may feel that their options are very minimal for them. Some of them felt that whatever decisions made in regards to the schools would be done without any input from them. In that context, their general willingness to have Elders be their formative evaluators is of major consequence.

Winter: The Elders

Elders: The two Elders interviewed were from the Treaty 6 Area; all responses were taken from that point of view and should be based on the geographical and cultural bases of the Cree Nations. The Elders both have worked extensively with the School system in the study and have a working experience with Alberta Education. The Elders both live on the same reserve as the schools and can give a social and communal perspective to the assessment.

The interviews with Elders were over a 2-day period and were done at a location in Edmonton with myself alone with them to discuss the research. I explained all rules and regulations with them and they seemed really unconcerned with the written text of the waiver. The proper protocols were followed and to them it was not required because they felt I was a part of the family and would talk to me as an acquaintance.

I include the things the Elders gave me in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

The origin of the idea

I wanted to find a way to get teachers, administrators, and students to recognize the contribution that Elders can make in the quality of education. Elders have made contributions in schools but their contribution has not usually been seen by teachers and administrators to be the most important in the schooling process. I saw a need for fundamental change in band operated schools on reserves: teaching strategies and classroom interaction have reinforced a separation between the community and school. Few teachers have the range of knowledge about the community, its history, and its dynamics, that Elders possess. Few teachers come close to Elders' knowledge about how to communicate. Yet good teachers know they can be better if they have resources, and direction, and support in those areas. There is one source for that information, the Elders. Most people associate Elders with "tradition." I thought that the best way to bring about change in this case was to recognize the Elders as change agents and to create a place in the system for them to deal with teachers on a day to day basis, on the very core of what we do in school. Evaluation is an area that teachers have to take seriously. Asking Elders to formatively evaluate teachers transforms the evaluative process.

The Objective

I was involved in reorientation and positive change in three different reserve school jurisdictions in the 1990s. When people asked me what was different about those reserve schools from schools in town, I explained that we had Elders from the community working in the school and other community resource people working directly with the children. I associated that fact with the changes I had witnessed in the schools. More children were staying in school rather than dropping out. They wanted to be in school.

There were still a few students who dropped out. The objective of bringing Elders and teachers together is to transform the school experience to one where real education takes place, and to create a place where teachers and children want to be. I do not want to see children left out in the cold without a good strong education because their survival, the survival of our people, depends on having a solid knowledge base. The objective of a program for getting Elders working with teachers is really to provide for the growth of something beautiful in the lives of teachers and children. This is something the culture and school have to offer.

Implications For Implementation

The Major Obstacles

I expected the teaching staff to be at least suspicious of letting Elders take on such an important role, and actually to oppose it. I had anticipated that only a strong statement by a school board, a clear directive, or even a formal resolution by Band Council, would bring any measure of teacher acceptance. I was proved wrong by the

questionnaire results. I found that existing school climate probably predisposed teachers either to be suspicious or accepting, but I think that the research project itself had a educating effect. It forced me to conceptualize the project in clearer terms than I otherwise might have. It was also a way to ask for the advice of teachers about the project.

Another major problem I anticipated was in the attitude of youth, and even some teachers, toward the Elders. I think that something that many Elders and many young people have in common is an ability to see right through an insincere person. I anticipated that some teachers and some students would not respect Elders. Having the ability to work with children is a gift, and one aspect of that gift is having a thick skin. We need Elders who are willing to take disrespectful people, step by step, to an understanding of self respect and the respect of others.

How To Know Whether Or Not Teacher Evaluation by Elders Is Working

The Elders and the people in the community have been in the community all their lives. Relative to that, the administrators and teachers come and go. Relative to the administrators and teachers, the evaluators come and go. Most of the time evaluators have very little connection to the community and are there briefly only toward the end of the year.

If we began a process of teacher evaluation by Elders, in order to evaluate whether or not it was working we would have had to have set some benchmarks and some criteria. Then I think we would need to look at evaluation as a process, not just in terms of outcomes relative to the benchmark. Using the metaphor of a trip, it does not make for a very satisfying trip to wait until the end of the journey to check mileage, just anticipating that sooner or later, with luck, you will show up at a destination. The benchmarks would be like the mileage check but the evaluation process itself would be like the journey—ongoing, ever changing to meet the immediate needs of individual teachers and individual situations. A central measure of whether or not this kind of evaluation is working would be whether or not the people who are involved feel good about what they are doing.

Why It Has Been Important to Find Out Teacher Attitude

As mentioned above, I anticipated that teachers would be reluctant or even suspicious. I found that most were not, but this project was not to find out how many teachers felt positive or negative, it was to look at the range of opinion and attitude. As long as one teacher felt threatened or reluctant, I wanted to know why in order to know how to demonstrate the value of the program to those who doubted it. I also wanted to be open to any potentially negative thing about the project that I had not thought of.

As an administrator I knew most of the teachers in the system. When it came time to interview a selected group of teachers about this project, it just happened that none of those selected were people that I knew very well. I had never evaluated them and in fact had never seen any of them teach. Interestingly enough, one of the groups of teachers that were involved in interviews had all been recruited by a particular principal, all were doing extremely well in the classroom, and all of them had the reputation in the school of being good teachers. They were not just open to having Elders in their classrooms, they had already taken the initiative, informally, to talk with Elders and to

have them in their classrooms. But in interviews with other teachers I discovered that there was in fact a real defensiveness, not just a reluctance, to be evaluated in any way by an Elder. When those teachers expressed their reluctance in terms of lack of respect for Elder knowledge, or lack of appropriateness of Elders evaluating professional practice, it occurred to me that those are exactly the teachers that the project needs to help. They need help. My reasoning was that if they hold those feelings about the people who have community knowledge, what do they feel about the students.

The interviews made me change my idea about program implementation. I had first thought that the best way to introduce a project like this would be simply to plan a program and arrange for the introduction of the Elders and teachers, to match them, and let them work together. I saw that that was too simplistic. Teachers still need peer mentors. Some people feel intimidated about approaching Elders or asking Elders questions. Until teachers are comfortable approaching Elders, they need mentors who can help them feel comfortable with that process. This process of Elder evaluation of teachers becomes more like the inclusion of Elders in a peer community of teachers.

Elders' Comments About This Research and The Plan to Evaluate Teachers

The Elders who met with me as part of the thesis project offered me observations about both the teachers' responses to the thesis project question and to the general plan of their being involved in evaluation. It really has to be repeated and emphasized that my relationship with them was not primarily as researcher nor as administrator. They saw me fill both of those roles but they met with me and were open with me because they knew who I was as a person.

That should stand as advice for anyone who contemplates asking Elders to be involved in teacher evaluation. A first step in doing that is to find the local Elders who are involved in education. Second, build a relationship with the Elder: it would be inappropriate just to go to one of them and say "I would like you to be an evaluator in my school." It does not work that way. A person has to build a relationship with the Elder. When the Elder knows he or she can take you seriously, you can take the Elder seriously. In this case I was fortunate to have known the Elders I was working with and had developed a relationship with them over a period of a few years. They knew where I was coming from. I had proved myself to them and they had certainly proved themselves to me.

First, they pointed out a basic observation. We are not just teaching, and we are not just teaching objects, we are teaching people. They wanted to focus on that fact: the young people in school were first "people" not "students." They were not objects. As people they are active agents, not robots that accept at face value what is given them.

Second, they reinforced for me that the community is a live context for teaching, not an "influence" on the school. In fact, I saw from them about how the way a community thinks and operates can change every variable: the context of the community determines what school content means. Teachers have to have a deep knowledge of what they are supposed to be teaching in school—the dark and dirty math of fractions, for example—but if the teacher focuses on that content and not on the community context in which she or he presents it, they are not teaching and they are not teachers. In other words, they have to have a deep understanding of much more than their subject area and child intellectual development.

Third, the Elders reinforced for me the unique social dynamics of reserves, because that makes a huge difference in what happens at school. If a celebration is going on somewhere on the reserve, a lot of students will see that as a priority over school. That is a fact of community life. Sometimes when a funeral is taking place on the reserve, the school might as well be shut down. Sometimes community crises hit the children in school really hard, as well as teachers who come from the community. Reserves are unique—no two are alike. And reserves are fundamentally different from small towns. That is a basic fact but my experience in the field makes me realize it has to be repeated: aboriginal communities are simply different from small towns or other rural communities.

Fourth, the Elders confirmed for me that in the school we need to recognize that the education process starts long before children come to school. Schools focus on people between the ages of six and eighteen years, generally. The Elders reminded me that education starts not just at birth, but at conception. Because I had been thinking in terms of school, my whole timeline took a quantum slip. Their reminder that education involves a whole life reminded me of the way I had previously tried to express that, a few years previously. Thinking about that issue is the thing that started me toward graduate work in education. The first teacher is the mother, then the father, then the nuclear and extended families, and then the community: the teacher in school has to be self aware and realize that he or she is one of many, with a unique and important place in education, but not solely responsible or accountable. Elders can help teachers define that unique place they have, and help teachers see their roles in the context of other agents of learning in people's lives. The Elders helped me see how the processes we are discussing are cyclic: the learner becomes the teacher. The spirit within is constant.

Dealing With Teacher Reluctance

Around one third of the teachers express misgivings about Elders being asked to work in teacher evaluation. Some teachers, even in this reserve school, see no reason to work with Elders in a school setting. In my opinion, it would be best to start this program by working with the one third of the teachers who strongly support it—the ones who really think it would be something to try—and working out a format for how to do it best, with them. A pilot project like that could be continued if it proved to be successful.

The Elders themselves can determine the first step to take, but it seems to me that the time to begin this practice is now. One of the effects of establishing the program and implementing it gradually, if it was demonstrated to be successful, would be that the teachers who are reluctant would buy into it. Those who could not accept the practice might self-select to find other places to work, or just find that they have outgrown that jurisdiction. One potential area for problems, if teachers who were negatively oriented to the program did not move, might be the creation of a division in the teaching and administrative personnel. School boards want the best for the students: I think that gradual implementation of the practice of formative teacher evaluation by Elders would motivate real change within four or five years.

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APPENDIX 1. QUESTIONNAIRE

Please Comment On A Suggestion For Formative Teacher Evaluation ...it will only take a minute....

It has been suggested that a good way to increase the relevance of schooling in Samson First Nation, and to meet the school's mandate of cultural relevance, would be to give teachers the opportunity to learn by working with an Elder who knows the culture. If this were to be implemented, it would take the place of formative teacher evaluation. An Elder would observe classes and then provide comments, in the form of discussion, for the teacher, from the perspective of the traditional and current culture of the community.

Please...look over the 20 statements on the next page. The first 14 are a list of possible areas where Elders might work with teachers. Would you take a minute to reflect on those and provide your opinion by checking the appropriate column as to whether you agree or not. If you have a general comment, or a comment about a specific item, write it on the back (or include whatever you'd like).

For the last section there are 6 general areas, and you are asked to note whether or not an Elder's contribution would be valuable (or appropriate) or not

This questionnaire has two functions.

First, it will form the basis for a discussion amongst teachers, the board, and community members, of the possibility of implementing just such a program.

Second, the results will be presented as a thesis research project by Mr Tim Margetts, at the University of Alberta.

1 Your participation is completely voluntary;
2 There is no way for anyone to know who responds and who does not.
3 Each questionnaire is completely anonymous, so your responses are confidential

Please, if you have any other comments, write them on the back of the questionnaire.

After you've completed the short questionnaire, seal it in the envelope and leave it with one of the school secretaries.

Elder. When we use this term with respect to our own community of Samson First Nation, it refers to the group of specific older people here who know the traditional culture and how it relates to today's world. They have been granted the authority to transmit knowledge of the past. They are expert at teaching methods in traditional terms. They are people who have earned respect.

Formative evaluation. "Summative" evaluation of teachers is done just to document how well a teacher meets some standard, used in issues such as contract renewal, etc. "Formative" evaluation on the other hand is a tool for professional growth. Instead of just looking at some external standard, formative evaluation is a collaboration between an evaluator and a teacher, meant to assist the teacher.

Tim Margetts, M.Ed. candidate, Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta
(Current contact information: address, fax, telephone number, e-mail address, etc.)

Regarding possible involvement of Elders...		Agree	Do Not Agree	No Opinion
1	I would like to know more about this, because I think it might be helpful.			
2	I see no reason to involve Elders in formative evaluation of teachers.			
3	This sounds okay, but whether or not it works would depend on how it's done.			
4	I am completely opposed.			
5	I think it would make a positive difference in the way we teach.			
6	This would be inappropriate because most Elders do not have formal training in education.			
7	Cultural methods of education are not appropriate for the kinds of teaching we must do for students to achieve mastery of the school curriculum.			
8	I would only be comfortable with this if I could choose which Elder to work with.			
9	I would only be comfortable with this if it were completely voluntary.			
10	Okay—but only if it involved no greater time commitment than our present load.			
11	There are better ways of achieving the same goal. (Comment on back.)			
12	I am concerned that the school setting may not be the place for working with Elders.			
13	I am concerned about observation of the appropriate cultural protocols in a program like this.			
14	I would like to know more about Cree culture.			

	Areas in which Elders could contribute...	Potentially Valuable	Not Valuable	No Opinion
15	Classroom management and student behaviour			
16	Interaction with students			
17	Instructional strategies			
18	Lesson preparation and organization			
19	A sense of history of the community			
20	Knowledge of the culture of the community			
21	Learning more about the current social dimensions of the community			

APPENDIX 2. TEACHER-RESPONDENT WRITTEN COMMENTS

All of the comments made teachers were copied verbatim and included in this report.

General Comments

Our Elders are not tools to be used at your convenience. One seeks information through proper protocol, it is up to the Elder to give information and not just because you think you deserve any info needed or wanted. The elder is highly respected, and I'm proud to see them working along side with the teachers for the benefit of our children and their future. Did you come to Hobbema just to seek info for your future book? May the Great Spirit help you find it elsewhere.

Perhaps a better way to utilize elders in the classroom would be to give the elders a different title/description. For example, 'Cultural Advisor". In this case scenario the elder would not be responsible for "evaluations" but instead for imparting knowledge and wisdom especially to the Non-First Nations staff. If teachers were assigned a Cultural Advisor they would have the option of utilizing the elder within the classroom. Given the sensitive nature of this idea it is reasonable to expect that teachers would be more apt to utilize elders in the classroom, at a great benefit to the students, if they didn't feel that they had no choice in the matter.

I believe Elders in the school would be valuable—however not in formative evaluation of teachers. (Only educators should evaluate teachers). Elders would be an asset in teaching the students & teachers about culture- also respect for elders is imp. For students. I believe it would benefit for students to read to 'elders'—primary grades.

I believe that Elders are very important to our classrooms. I welcome any advice, suggestions, e.t.c... they have. I would like to see Elders in the classroom, it would be valuable for everyone but I do not want to be evaluated by them. When we go to university for 4 yrs. to be a teacher we learn areas to teach, how to teach, how to plan, and e.t.c.... Would an Elder who had not attended university know how to evaluate us. (I do not mean to put them down, I hope you understand what I am saying.)

Some of the questions on this survey you can't agree or disagree with. I feel Elders would be valuable in the classroom setting. But I am still unsure of how I would be evaluated. What are they looking for? More thought should be put into a project like this. First of all, an elder would be a good tool if you were a Cree immersion teacher but he/she would still need to know the curriculum and the expectations of Alberta Ed. You cannot solely have an elder who is unaware of curriculum procedure evaluate you fairly.

Note: Having an Elder in the classroom is good, however, the Elders are supposedly known to have knowledge on the cultural content, in my case whenever I inquire about cultural or traditional things, these Elders respond `I think so'. At times their answers frustrated me because I expect the Elders to know. So, I phone other Elders and usually tell me what I want to know. Personally, in my opinion the Elders would really be helpful in handling of behavior students. But , then again in this era children do not listen like in the past decades.

It would be great to involve elders in the school to make cultural links between the curriculum and Native Culture/society".

Comments Associated With Specific Questionnaire Items

Question 2

As long as it is formative evaluation it may help in terms of classroom management.

Question 6

Elders with formal training in education would be a bonus.

Question 7

Mastery of curriculum is dependent on many variables.

It would be great to involve elders in a home liaison role also.

For the above areas the elders do not need to take an 'evaluation' kind of role…but it would be nice to have them take a more active role in the school. (councilor area?).

Question 11

I think having an Elder in the school would be an excellent way to teach the native student about 'who they are'. However in order to achieve this goal, a plan of action would be needed to be implemented. Speaking as a professional staff and being native we have just started a beginning of a cultural club in the school where I am teaching at. I feel that having an Elder with knowledge of the traditional Values would enhance the learning of those students and maybe bring back 'Respect' which is lacking in most communities due to lack of utilization of our Elders.

A personality clash could be detrimental.

Teacher practice experiences dictate that the relationships must be positive or the teacher will do very poorly.

Elder should be involved everyday in teaching student the reality of life. In order to be a winner in life, they need an education. Evaluation of students by the Elders would be better than evaluation of teachers. An evaluation is only good if something is done to fix the problem. Students in general do not care about education. What can we do?

It has been my observation over 5 years that elders have not disciplined or expected students to sit/ be respectful.

It takes the whole community/Dept. to raise a child !

Question 15

Elders respect model

APPENDIX 3. GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHIC RESOURCES

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